

Conscientious Objection

Jo Vellacott

Conscientious Objection

Bertrand Russell
and the Pacifists
in the First World War



Jo Vellacott

Jo Vellacott is a doyenne among peace historians, whose pioneering work will inform a new generation of peace activists. Resident in Canada for many years, she spent her formative years in England. In 1969, she discovered the unsorted papers of Catherine Marshall in the Cumbria Record Office and saw that they were full of previously unknown material about Bertrand Russell's work with conscientious objectors. These papers had been rescued but no funds were available to catalogue them, so Jo undertook this mammoth labour of love, sorting the First World War materials useful for her own research and then finishing the rest, which covered Marshall's activities for suffrage and then for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Jo's acclaimed book, Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War, was first published in 1980. In 2015, Spokesman is republishing it under the title Conscientious Objection. Her introduction to this new edition, reprinted here, explains how she came to focus on the thousands of conscientious objectors. Jo's review article of Cyril Pearce's important book, Comrades in Conscience, follows.

* * *

The 1960s and 1970s brought a revived interest in opposition to war and in ways of working for peace; also, largely through his visibility in the anti-nuclear weapons movement, in the peace work of Bertrand Russell. Now, four decades later, many of us are again, and urgently, beginning to tire of the study of war and to look back at previous opposition to war and forward to

further work on alternatives. We should be considering how to do away with it altogether.

Meanwhile, the centenary of the First World War has come round, bringing with it an important opportunity to make sure that those who resisted war fever, refusing to be part of the killing, be remembered for their wisdom and courage alongside those whom we remember for their courage and, alas, for their obedience to the demands of authority. It is some time since I was engaged in active research, although I am still writing, and I am seeking ways to put to use my reservoir of knowledge of those who refused to fight in the war, and those who dedicated themselves to helping them resist.

I am glad to have this book become available again, virtually unchanged, but with a new title to emphasise the role of the Conscientious Objectors. Although this story of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) focuses on Bertrand Russell's contribution, it has been recognised as contributing to an understanding of how the NCF was made up, how it worked, its successes and failures, and dissensions within it, particularly over the acceptability of various forms of alternative service and of political action in the cause of peace. On the Russell shelf, it pairs neatly with Nicholas Griffin's new *A Pacifist at War* (Spokesman, 2014) which, through a selection of letters, gives a vivid picture of Russell's complicated personal life, the background to his work in the cause of peace. On the history shelf its companions include, among others, Thomas Kennedy's *The Hound of Conscience* (University of Arkansas, 1981); David Boulton's *Objection Overruled* (new edition, Dales Historical Monographs, 2014); John Rae's *Conscience and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1970); for women's work for peace, Sybil Oldfield's *Thinking Against the Current* (Sussex Academic Press, 1913; reviewed in *Spokesman 127* by Jo Vellacott); and, for a more general overview of opposition to the First World War, Adam Hochschild's *To End All Wars* (Houghton Mifflin, 2011). Other essential work on conscientious objection during the First World War includes the earliest, John W. Graham's *Conscription and Conscience* (Allen and Unwin, 1922, reprinted by Forgotten Books, 2012), and the new and ongoing work of Cyril Pearce, with its invaluable focus on, first, regional differences in attitudes to war and to conscientious objectors in *Comrades in Conscience* (Francis Boutle, 2001, new edition 2014) and second, on the recovery and listing of the names of COs throughout the country; his interactive database of already 20,000 will go online under the auspices of the Imperial War Museum in 2015.

Although it did not come out until 1980, I wrote *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists* at an exciting time in the story of the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University, and at a time when research followed a very different pattern from that of today. Completed in 1975, the original draft, written for my doctoral thesis, came together while the core material of the archives was still being sorted and while smaller additions – and often big surprises (what, yet another unknown lover?) – came in by every post.

I have recently read Nicholas Griffin's *A Pacifist at War* with enjoyment, not least because it took me back to the time when I went off to the University of Texas to read Bertie's letters to Ottoline Morrell, newly acquired, and not then available anywhere else. I spent a month at Austin, making notes (photocopying was not permitted), and thanking whatever powers there be that Russell had such legible handwriting. My focus was narrow; I wanted light on Russell's public pacifist activities. I can only rejoice that I did not have to take account of all the detail about his kaleidoscopic personal life revealed in Griffin's book. Yet although I barely skimmed his love letters, my narrative is indeed intensely personal. But the Conscientious Objectors are really the heroes of this story, and I think Russell would have wanted it to be so.

As it happened, the Russell Archives was only the takeoff point; most of my material was to be found elsewhere. Getting a grant to travel from the Canada Council, I went to the UK, dreaming vaguely of unearthing a complete archive of the No-Conscription Fellowship. I knew that the NCF kept duplicates of everything, for backup in case of government raids, and I thought that perhaps some major collection lurked forgotten in some obscure attic, somehow omitted from the wholesale voluntary purge that took place to preserve privacy and reputations at the end of the war. I never found it.

What I did find was something of at least equal value – as it turned out, I think, of greater value. I knew of Catherine Marshall as an important colleague of Russell's in the NCF, and I had already made my way to the Clifford Allen archive at the University of South Carolina, so when I learnt that her papers were in the Cumberland (now Cumbria) Record Office at Carlisle, I went there without delay.

The work Marshall had done with Russell probably played a large part in the preservation of her archive; at the time that a mass of more or less jumbled papers had been found in hampers in a shed at Hawse End, the family home of the Marshalls, near Keswick, in the English Lake District, she and her remarkable work for peace and for women had undeservedly faded from public memory. But manuscript recognisably in Russell's hand

and correspondence with many well known politicians were visible in the jumble, ensuring that the papers were rescued and taken into safe keeping in the Record Office. No funds were available for cataloguing them, so when I turned up, I was permitted to undertake the first sorting, with the blessing of the archivist, Bruce Jones. This unpaid task would occupy all my available time for a number of years, but by the end of that first summer (1969), I had most of the Russell material I needed, and returned to the Russell Archives with a vast load of photocopies and microfilm. The end notes of *Conscientious Objection* provide ample evidence of how important a source Marshall's papers were.

Later, I went back to complete the first sorting of the Marshall papers, and to begin research on other aspects of her life's work, the significance of which I had already begun to understand. My work and that of others who have used her papers has led to progress being made in reinstating her to the leading position which should be hers in both peace work and work for women's rights. This is not the place to tell in full how her story unfortunately exemplifies the dictum that history is told by the victors, but it is necessary and appropriate to comment on the part that Russell played in shrinking the picture of her work for the NCF, and distorting it.

Russell's first few months in the NCF had qualities which could not last, and could never be replicated. A particular kind of companionship comes when we work closely with a few others in a crisis situation, and Mephy (Russell's nickname), CA (Clifford Allen) and CEM (Catherine Marshall) had it in abundance for a few months in the early days of the implementation of the Military Service Act. Russell later forgot the intensity and the joy of the experience, but he left it on record in his letters to Ottoline Morrell.

In these early days, CA's role was to inspire, Russell's was to provide a name, to write letters and articles, to speak and to learn, CEM's was to organise, to provide knowledge of public personalities, to show how the system worked, and to be constantly on call. For Russell, she was in fact a mentor and a facilitator, enabling him to make use of his special gifts and providing the nitty-gritty of support. Russell appreciated her special skills and knowledge. These three called each other 'Comrade' and in their various roles rubbed along together informally and effectively, responding to crisis after crisis, until two things occurred to change the balance and the interaction. The first was CA's imprisonment, predictable and indeed delayed for longer than could have been expected. The second was the formalisation of their roles; the old Political Associates' Committee was gone and Russell and Marshall became part of the formal structure of the

NCF. At the end of 1916, both were candidates for the position of Acting Chair of the NCF; Russell took the position. She was still the one who best knew what needed to be done, but she tried to play the subordinate; he made a better administrator than he himself thought, but unconsciously retained some of the expectations normally attendant on his rank and position.

There is not much that I would change in how I depicted the relationship between Russell and Marshall. She did her best to support him in his work; he did a great deal initially to support her, both in her NCF work and in her private grief for Allen. Gradually, personal characteristics in each contributed to a deteriorating relationship. Under the pressure of too much work and diminished hope for a good outcome, her ever present compulsion to overwork escalated; but he never admitted that his complicated private life, his underlying yen to return to philosophy, and even an element of boredom with the tedious aspects of NCF work resulted in his failure at times to fulfil his obligations. Her ‘cantankerous’ letters were not wholly without justification. Russell’s view of Catherine’s work for the NCF was not shared by most of her colleagues, but there is no evidence that he ever regained his initial high opinion of her work; he never made an opportunity to pay tribute to what she had done for the Conscientious Objectors.

I find it inappropriate to end my introduction to the new edition on so negative a note. This is still the story of a great man, serving a vital cause in a remarkable way, by stepping completely outside any role that could have been forecast for him, a man who was born and bred to be an intellectual, an academic, an aristocrat, who was able to work alongside others in a very different world and for an unpopular cause.

*Jo Vellacott, **Conscientious Objection: Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War**, Spokesman Books, new edition 2015, 340 pages, ISBN 9780851248424, £14.99*

‘Jo Vellacott’s excellent book is a model of careful scholarship, clear and lively writing, and the choice of a subject that matters deeply. One hundred years on, it’s high time we honoured those who had the courage to speak out against the madness of the First World War and who suffered for doing so. It’s a delight to see this volume available again.’

Adam Hochschild
author of the bestseller *To End All Wars*

Where Huddersfield Led

In January 1917, about twenty young men who attempted to disrupt a meeting in the Victoria Hall in Huddersfield were driven from the premises in ignominious defeat, among the cheers of the audience. Disruption of meetings was not uncommon at this time; in London, the *Daily Express* made a practice of announcing meetings of pacifist organisations in order to encourage rowdies to cause trouble. What is remarkable about this event is that the speaker was to be Philip Snowden, a notorious socialist pacifist Member of Parliament, and that it was the disrupters who lost out, not the pacifist supporters.

Cyril Pearce's remarkable book, *Comrades in Conscience*, provides an in-depth history of the background to the unusual public visibility of anti-war sentiment and, even more significantly, of tolerance for its expression that prevailed in Huddersfield. The book opens with a description of Huddersfield in 1914, but one that is in fact (and usefully) more of a history of how it came to be what it was, a graphic account of the rapid rise of a prosperous manufacturing town, and of its political development. Complexities abound, but, to simplify, what emerges is a picture of a city with a strongly Liberal political bent, although with a rising Conservative component, and a politically active working class, socialist in its sympathies, but itself uneasily divided in its allegiance to the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the British Socialist Party (BSP) and trade union loyalties.

Colouring Huddersfield's social history is a mix of nonconformist religion, paternalism, self-help, and co-operation. All of this made for a climate of vigorous, but on the whole respectful, controversy; everything was discussed publicly (and, by inference, privately) in meetings, adult schools, Socialist Sunday Schools, churches, the municipal council, trade unions, women's groups, fora of every political colour. The community was well served by its three newspapers, the *Examiner* (Liberal), the *Chronicle* (Conservative), and the *Worker* (Socialist). Again and again, as I read the description of Huddersfield before the war, I was struck by the vigour of the discussions that took place, on paper, in the press, at meetings, within organisations, in church groups, within trade unions, and at the municipal government level. All topics were up for discussion and opinion – social issues, political issues, ethical issues, and of course at the forefront, the issues of the day. The coming of war only intensified the vitality of these discussions and, if anything, widened the range of involvement.

In the summer of 1914 Huddersfield was experiencing a bitter strike in the engineering industry, the industrial field second only in that city to the multifaceted textile industry. Local interest was on this, and, in common with the rest of Britain, on the crisis in Ireland. As long as the cabinet in Westminster, unable to achieve unity, sat on its hands and made no public statement of its intentions, Huddersfield was part of the general picture of no more than detached interest in the antics of militarists in Europe. When it belatedly became clear that British intervention was a real possibility, Huddersfield was still not much different from the rest of Britain in the demonstrations that were held in favour of British neutrality.

When, suddenly, British involvement was a reality, the major Liberal press throughout the country made a complete turnaround, and began to talk in patriotic terms of the expectation that men would rush to the colours. A Liberal government had led Britain into the war, and so was now at pains to turn the war into a holy crusade; the Conservatives had long wanted this war; the Parliamentary Labour Party had fallen into line, only the Independent Labour Party stood out against the war. The Huddersfield *Examiner* competed with the *Chronicle* in its support for the war effort. But in this northern area the attempt did not resonate with all; internationalist thinking and a belief in progress towards a peaceful world had informed the thinking of many Liberals. Some middle-class Liberals found something in common with the socialist internationalism of many workers. Many socialists clung to their belief in international class solidarity as more relevant to them than any call to patriotism; the *Worker* continued to blame the militarist class for the war and to advocate for revolutionary change to put industry under the control of the workers.

Detailed local study provides a microscope under which to examine generalisations and myths about attitudes to the war. Pearce effectively demonstrates weaknesses in the myth that presents workers as having leapt to the support of the nation, giving up their previous investment in the class struggle. As he sees it, although socialist internationalism had not found the leaders who could draw it together across borders, nor had patriotism won out over the consciousness of the class struggle, which continued as an important factor in local industrial relations, not only in the known areas of unrest such as the Clyde, but throughout Yorkshire, and most visibly in Huddersfield. Rather than ready to make sacrifices in the name of patriotism, we see a work-force ready to exploit the government's urgent need for product, and the opportunities this provided for workers; several minor strikes in late 1914 and in 1915 won their objectives with comparative ease, and, of course, their employers were also benefiting

from the boom in war production. Conscientious objectors (COs) were even sent to Huddersfield to perform such work; these were mainly those from religious organisations, such as the Christadelphians, whose emphasis was on the command not to kill but whose church approved their producing military clothing or even picric acid, used in detonators for bombs. Socialists, who were not willing to kill German conscripts, and Quakers, who opposed all use of violence, mostly rejected this form of alternative service.

During the early months of the war, while some bickering went on within, for instance, the Trades Council (a forum which brought together the various elements of labour opinion) actual opposition to the war effort was necessarily expressed more through inaction than through direct action, that is, by not volunteering for the armed forces. My previous study has been focused mainly on the national and London scene, where I have found opponents of the war struggling to find a place to express their views. Pearce shows something quite different in Huddersfield, presenting a vivid picture of open public discussion of the issues, with the pro-war elements having to create space for themselves in a climate where prevailing opinion was anti-war. A Huddersfield Workers' Own Recruiting Committee (HWORC) came into being, and provided a platform for some local leaders, but it seems to have been mainly the product of government action, and it remained largely ineffective, though rather more success was achieved on those occasions when recruiting was carried out with the help of a parade of soldiers, complete with regimental band. From the beginning of the war, the membership of the local Civilian Recruiting Committee had reinforced the sense of class division. Unable to draw in labour representatives (curiously, only one even from the HWORC), its efforts were mostly directed at employers and the Town Council, where they had some success in having men of military age laid off or pressured in other ways to volunteer for service. As elsewhere, departing recruits were seen off by crowds; even in these Pearce detects a more sober spirit than is depicted by mythology – and by some recent historians.

By the autumn of 1915, long casualty lists and the growing probability of conscription provided a focus for both pro and anti-war sentiment. In Huddersfield opposition was vocal, especially among workers and their organisations. Support for Liberalism in Huddersfield seems to have gone deeper than political support for the Liberal Party, entailing liberal values that made conscription hard to accept, even for some of those who reluctantly supported the war.

Something of the same dislike of compulsion had troubled the Cabinet;

indeed, the inclusion of the conscience clause in the Military Service Acts, when they were finally passed in 1916, was the child of liberal unease among those in power. The conscience clause was, in a very real sense, a breakthrough, but it was badly worded and obscure and led to a great deal of difficulty. Pearce's detailed examination of the functioning of the Huddersfield Tribunal is of considerable interest, enabling us to position it in the local political context, a rare opportunity. The exceptional tolerance to COs shown in Huddersfield seldom extended to the decisions of the tribunal, but did from time to time enable it unwillingly to serve as a forum for the expression of anti-war or anti compulsion opinion. In Huddersfield; COs might be publicly reviled by some, but so might those be who condemned them, and in general there was a warmth towards those who suffered for their opposition to the war, and for their families, similar to that felt for those who accepted conscription and went off to fight.

No one has looked more carefully or analytically at those who opposed conscription than Pearce, and it is interesting that in his examination of Huddersfield conscientious objectors, he did not find any congruence or overwhelming influence; they came with a wide variety of motivation, background, and political and religious orientation.

Was Huddersfield an anomaly, different from anywhere else? Or did what Pearce has uncovered as going on there occur in other places, which have however remained undocumented? The answer would seem to be both that Huddersfield was unique, and that there may well have been more resistance to the war throughout the country, and in particular in the north, than has previously been thought, and for which some of us have found scattered anecdotal evidence.

Pearce includes tables listing the diverse motivations and political and religious backgrounds of Huddersfield COs, a work that he has now extended to all COs in Britain, initiating the invaluable database, the *Pearce Register of British Conscientious Objectors*, which has been adopted by the Imperial War Museum as part of its *Lives of the First World War* collection. It may well be that this work will help answer some of the questions opened up by this important book.

Jo Vellacott

Cyril Pearce, Comrades In Conscience: The story of an English community's opposition to the Great War, Francis Boutle Publishers, revised edition 2014, 304 pages, ISBN 9781903427828, £15 (www.francisboutle.co.uk)